



Mallika Dutt

Breakthrough for Human Rights

By SMITA JAIN

In the East meets West world of corporate expansion, it is common to hear of American companies having affiliate offices in India, and vice versa. Nonprofit organizations promoting transcontinental social change, it seems, are not far behind. Mallika Dutt, 45, founder of Breakthrough, a human rights organization that functions through affiliate offices in New York and New Delhi, finds that both offices complement each other and build on the organization's *raison d'être*—that of advancing global human rights.

"The U.S. and India, as the world's largest democracies with extremely diverse populations, have been of particular interest to me because I feel if human rights are to be protected and promoted, this must be successfully done in the U.S. and India," explains Dutt, who works out of the New York office and spends four months each year in India. "On a personal level, I have also been interested in the U.S. and India because of my dual identity as an Indian American," she adds.

Dutt started Breakthrough in 1999 as a means to promote human rights values through media, education and popular culture. It works to promote women's rights, sexual and reproductive rights, immigrant rights, racial, ethnic and caste equality.

In India, popular entertainment has proven to be an effective way to reach the masses. In 2000, Breakthrough's pop album

Mann Ke Manjeere: An Album of Women's Dreams (Virgin Records) topped the national charts for five months. Its title song by Shubha Mudgal, based on the true story of a woman who left her abusive husband to become a truck driver, was named the Best Indipop Music Video at the 2001 Screen Awards and was nominated for the MTV Music Awards. More recently, Breakthrough's HIV/AIDS campaign titled "What Kind of a Man Are You?" drew national attention for its sensitive approach to a controversial subject—the fact that increasing numbers of Indian women are being infected with HIV by their husbands—and for its unparalleled use of mainstream media to raise awareness.

Support from India's top media houses has played a large part in Breakthrough's success in reaching out to the audiences, says Dutt. "The partnerships that we have developed with mainstream entertainment industry players and media in India have been phenomenal," she says. "In the 'What Kind of Man Are You?' campaign, McCann Erickson India (the Indian branch of New York-based advertising agency McCann Erickson) developed our entire campaign pro bono. We were then able to disseminate the campaign extensively with donated [time] through television, radio and print and through the Internet. More than 21 TV channels, 15 newspapers and magazines, five radio

channels and six multiplexes...around the country partnered with us to disseminate the campaign in seven languages.”

While Breakthrough’s programs in India focus on promoting women’s rights through the medium of popular culture, in the United States, Breakthrough’s programs focus on building awareness of racial justice and immigrant rights largely through public dialogue. “Our approach in the U.S. has been different because it has been far more difficult to partner with the mainstream entertainment industry,” says Dutt. “We have had to create and produce our media within the organization and rely on Internet and new media distribution strategies for dissemination. As a result, we have also convened large public forums on human rights issues within the U.S.” In September 2006 Breakthrough organized a public forum in New York City to discuss the importance of a human rights movement in America. The event, co-sponsored by 70 organizations, attracted 600 participants from around the United States, including students, social justice leaders and performers. Speakers included Larry Cox, executive director of

Courtesy Malika Dutt



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Amnesty International USA, and Mary Beth Maxwell, founding executive director of American Rights at Work.

Breakthrough’s “Value Families” campaign, launched to demonstrate how fair and just immigration policies that respect human rights can benefit all Americans, was one of 10 campaigns singled out at the second annual Clinton Global Initiative in September 2006. Dutt also received a certificate of commitment from former President Bill Clinton. “President Clinton’s recognition of the ‘Value Families’ campaign is critical to our efforts to reach out to partners in the business and entertainment industries. We need to build strong coalitions if we are to realize human rights in the U.S.,” says Dutt. Through engaging multimedia and public education workshops, the campaign aims to reduce fear of and hostility toward immigrants, and create public dialogue that leads to what Breakthrough considers fair immigration policies.

Bridging public policy and popular culture in India and the United States, Breakthrough is pioneering an approach to human rights aimed at challenging stereotypes, examining existing social conventions, and ultimately, influencing the way in which individuals, communities and nations interact with each other.



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